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Careers work in higher education in Pakistan: Current practice and options for the future

Abstract

In this article we examine the development of career guidance in Pakistani higher education. The article is primarily based on a review of the existing literature on career guidance in Pakistan, but also includes the consideration of some new data gathered from a review of higher education institutions websites and five case study interviews. It considers both local and global influences as relevant contexts for understanding how the development of career guidance in Pakistani higher education is taking place. Concerns about alignment between skills supply and demand provide key drivers both for the development of career guidance and for wider higher education reform. However the practice of career guidance in Pakistani higher education is shown to be lagging behind the policy aspirations, both due to limited investment and due to more fundamental cultural challenges that have yet to be fully addressed. If career guidance is going to continue to develop within Pakistan it will need to be strengthened by new policy and resources but also through the development of indigenous theories.

Keywords: career guidance, Pakistan, higher education, policy, graduates

Career Work in Higher Education in Pakistan

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Introduction

This article discusses the implementation of career guidance within Pakistani higher education. It begins by discussing the country in relation to some of the key challenges that career guidance practitioners face, it then moves on to discuss the policy context within which the development of career guidance has been fostered. Finally, it explores the specific experience of implement career guidance within higher education.

Pakistan is a large and populace country where 61% of the total population is found in rural areas (Srivastava & Khare, 2012; World Bank, 2017). The country has a number of educational and social challenges which interface with the delivery of career guidance. These include low levels of adult literacy with UNICEF (2013) reporting that only 79% of young men and 61% of young women (aged 15-24) are literate. The country is also experiencing a moderate level of youth unemployment (10.7% of the labour force aged 15-24 years in 2016 according to Statista, 2017). These challenges within the education and employment systems interact with large scale internal and outward migration (Jan, Iqbal, & Iftikharuddin, 2008).

Pakistan is an Islamic country which also has a number of religious and cultural features which shape the way in which career guidance can be integrated into society. The country's culture is similar to other Asian countries where 'family obligation and loyalty, as well as self-sacrifice and obedience toward one's elders' are key elements of individuals' thinking and of the national culture (Shariff, 2009, p.35). Pakistanis typically have close socioemotional bonds with their families which can be considered a source of pressure but equally provide a buffer to stress in difficult circumstances. These collectivist features of the culture influence the educational and career decisions that Pakistanis make (Naz et al., 2014). This means that Pakistanis have access to informal support and advice with their careers and have to balance their own interests with familial and community expectations (Khalil, 2011). These cultural factors create some challenges for implementing career guidance especially when it is underpinned by theories developed in the West which make assumptions about individuals as sovereign choice-makers.

Another influence on the development of Pakistani career guidance is the country's complex and rapidly changing labour market. The labour market in Pakistan is influenced by

both local realities and globalisation. These dual influences call for the development of a dynamic career guidance approach in higher education which can connect students with both local and global labour markets. Pakistan's major industries include agriculture, manufacturing, hospitality, business, finance and education (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2011). However, the country is actively seeking to move towards a 'knowledge economy' (Kalim & Lodhi, 2002). This attempt to purposefully shift the economy of the country is one of the policy rationales that informs an interest in career guidance. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of the Pakistani labour market is magnified by globalisation and associated policy initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor which is designed to drive economic growth and increase economic interactions with the rest of Asia and the world. The influence of globalisation is also evident in the high levels of outward migration evident in the country. Over 8.7 million Pakistanis are estimated to have left the country since the 1970s (Ministry of Overseas Pakistanis and Human Resource Development, 2015; United Nations, 2016).

Globalisation has also brought about cultural changes which have influenced Pakistanis' career thinking. The internet has introduced citizens to career opportunities beyond the country's borders. More fundamentally there is concern about 'Westernisation' with one study showing a move away from large family groups to a more Western-style nuclear family system (Ibrahim, Abbasi, Adnan, & Bhatti, 2011).

The country is therefore going through social and economic changes which have major implications for the way in which individual's careers unfold. This has led to a growing interest in career guidance, which has traditionally been weak. In the places where career guidance has been practiced in Pakistan, such as in higher education and some private schools, it has often been reliant on imported theories and practices rather than an in-country approach developed to meet specific domestic and cultural needs.

A key policy aim for the introduction of career guidance in Pakistan has been the aim of connecting university graduates more closely with the labour market by easing their transition from education to employment and supporting the alignment of skills with economic need. The National Education Policy explicitly links higher education with the labour market in light of the country's ambition to participate in the global knowledge economy and create a lifelong learning system (Ministry of Education, 2009). A key element of this agenda is a desire to strengthen graduates' skills and make them more career ready and employable. This has provided a context within which career guidance has been growing and developing within the Pakistani higher education system. In this article we look at this growth and explore some of the key challenges for career guidance in this context. The article is primarily based on a review of the existing academic and grey literature on career guidance in Pakistan, but we have supplemented this with some new data gathered from a review of higher education institutions websites and five case study interviews.

Career guidance offers a policy tool which has been demonstrated in other countries to support economic and educational policies by strengthening the connections between education and the labour market and increasing individuals' capacity to navigate the education and employment systems (Hooley, 2014; OECD, 2004). However, introducing career guidance within the Pakistani higher education system is not straightforward. Haider (2008) and Roof (2015) have listed numerous social, cultural and political challenges faced by higher education in Pakistan. The social, cultural and political context of Pakistan inevitably frames the shape and modalities of career services and means that importing foreign concepts, theories and practices create challenges. If Pakistan is going to successfully borrow career guidance policies and practices there is a need for research to examine how these practices can best be integrated in local systems and cultures in order to avoid what Sultana (2009) refers as the "internal dissatisfaction" that often emerges when international practices are implemented within local contexts.

The changing role of higher education in Pakistan

Pakistan has an established and growing higher education (HE) system with both government and private institutions. There are 170 universities in both the private and public sectors educating 1.3 million students (Ministry of Finance, 2016, p.174) with some evidence suggesting that Pakistani higher education is continuing to grow (Taylor, 2017). The Economist Intelligence Unit (2015) has estimated that around 5.1% of Pakistanis aged 17-23 are enrolled in higher education with male and female enrollment in the universities accounting for 54% and 46% respectively (Huma, 2016, p. 23).

The majority of Pakistani universities are in cities and their distribution is weighted heavily in favour of more prosperous regions (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2014). However, there is some growth in low-cost provision serving a wider population. However, people in major cities and in the middle to upper socioeconomic strata continue to have more opportunities to participate in higher education than the wider population.

Higher education is viewed as having a critical role in Pakistan's economy. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are charged with developing employable graduates with sufficient critical and analytical skills to meet employers' needs. However, there have been many criticisms of the Pakistani higher education system and its relevance to the labour market. Studies suggest that there are generally weak links between universities and industry (Bilal & Khan, 2012). With respect to the development of skills, Farooq (2011) argued that both the level and the type of skills that are developed by the HE system are poorly aligned with the needs of industry. Aziz et al. (2014) also argued that graduates emerge with too few of the technical and social skills required for employment.

Studies with employers endorse these criticisms of the higher education system (e.g. Mirza, Jaffri, & Hashmi, 2014; Shahbaz, 2017; Uzair-ul-Hassan & Noreen, 2013). Grant

Thornton Consulting (2016) highlighted concerns amongst employers about the soft skills of graduates such as their written communication, leadership skills and critical thinking skills. Uzair-ul-Hassan and Noreen (2013) reported concerns about graduates' communication skills and strategic and abstract thinking, and their research skills to answer business problems.

This mismatch between the skills of graduates and those needed by the economy has led to a number of negative effects for graduates. Haider (2016) has noted that this has led to considerable underemployment for graduates, with many Pakistani graduates taking up unskilled or semi-skilled roles following graduation. While Haque (2013) has suggested that graduate unemployment is also growing, the Labour Force Survey (Federal Bureau of Statistics, 2015) finds that graduates make up 9.88% of all underemployed workers in Pakistan (defined as working less than 35 hours a week) and 18.82% of all unemployed workers. Such statistics suggest that higher education is not delivering labour market returns for a substantial minority of Pakistani graduates.

There has been a concerted effort to address these problems and to reform HE. The National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2009) envisions that by 2030 the educational system will be producing "citizens who contribute significantly to the information/knowledge-based global economy" (p.54). The Higher Education Commission (HEC) has sought to address this through reforms within HE which improve research and development and encourage engagement with industry (Akhter, Rafi, Ahmed, & Rauf, 2011; Taylor, 2017). HEC brings universities of all types under one umbrella and has introduced quality assurance mechanisms to encourage universities to closer align programs with the needs of the labour market. This has included developing curricula to focus on creating employable graduates with relevant skills and involving employers in the development of these curricula. As part of this, HEC has been working to establish career counselling or placement centres in public universities for around a decade (Dawn, 2006; Higher Education Commission, 2007; Quality Assurance Agency, Higher Education Commission, 2011). These centres are supposed to help students to link with the labour market and transition to graduate jobs. However, the implementation of these reforms has varied across different universities.

Career guidance in Pakistan

The broader economic situation in Pakistan as well as concerns about the alignment of higher education with the labour market demand a coordinated policy response. Career guidance offers a tool for public policy that can speak to many of these concerns. However, the level of development of career guidance within Pakistan is relatively low. There are few trained career counsellors, inconsistent approaches to career guidance and only a few degree programs which support the training and initial education of career guidance professionals. The launch of the master's program in Career Counselling and Education at the National University of Sciences and Technology in 2013 offers one initiative which is seeking to improve this situation. However, in addition to these issues with professionalisation, there is also a limited evidence

base which so far has largely focused on the need for, and practice of, career guidance at high school level (see Khan, 2010; Merchant, 2008).

There are several bodies which advocate for the development of career guidance within Pakistan. For example, British Council Pakistan run a series of annual symposia for counsellors (British Council, 2017) and the national Association for Career Counsellors and Vocational Guides was launched in 2012 in Karachi following an intervention by the International Labour Organization (ILO) (ILO, 2017). The media has also highlighted the importance of career guidance and provided commentary on its low level of development in Pakistan (Turbat, 2012; Wasif, 2010) although again this is largely focused on career guidance in the school system. However, despite growing public enthusiasm and debate, at present, career guidance remains at an early stage of development in Pakistan. Some private schools and colleges have introduced career guidance and have employed professional career counsellors, but this is not generally the case in government schools and colleges (Wasif, 2010; Yaqoob, Arif, Samad & Iqbal, 2017). Similarly, some of the larger universities, typically those with higher status in the major cities have begun delivering career guidance services.

There has also been the growth of a private sector of career guidance providers in Pakistan. Organisations like Eduvision (2017) have realised that there is a wider market for career guidance services and have sought to meet this demand by providing commercial career counselling and career information services. Other opportunities to access career support are available through the internet but such services are of limited use to the wider population as they require internet access and often English language skills. Within employment there are a few large organisations which have developed a strong focus on employee development as part of their human resource management systems. However, again this kind of provision is only accessible to a small minority of Pakistan's population.

There are also key cultural challenges to developing career guidance and career thinking in Pakistan which we have already alluded to. Pakistan's collectivist culture means that encouraging individual career decision-making, as is typically endorsed in Western career theory, may sit uncomfortably with many of the clients of such services. Many people look for career support to their family and community rather than seeking it from professionals. Other important cultural features include the countries strongly patriarchal culture which offers particular challenges for offering career guidance to women and the position of the Islamic religion as a key influence on people's thinking about their own place in society. Such cultural features necessitate careful thinking and retheorising of career guidance practice to ensure cultural relevance.

Career guidance in higher education in Pakistan

The development of a career guidance system within higher education in Pakistan gained momentum around 2007 in response to the HEC report (Higher Education Commission, 2007).

Much of the development of career guidance in higher education has been driven by the HEC (Batoool & Qureshi, 2008) as part of a drive to improve the quality and relevance of education for the labour market. The HEC's institutional performance evaluation manual (Quality Assurance Agency, Higher Education Commission, 2011) now demands that HEIs develop student support services including career counselling centers and placement offices.

Watts (1999, p. 2) noted that countries which are beginning to develop career guidance systems, particularly those with developing economies, tend to view the activity in terms of 'labour-utilisation considerations' and this rationale does indeed undergird the current practices in higher education in Pakistan. The universities are heavily focused on linking students with the labour market as part of an immediate transition from university rather than on provision of services for career development and progression as a lifelong process.

The desire to connect students with the labour market has led to the establishment of career guidance services in several different universities in Pakistan. Universities such as the National University of Sciences and Technology (Islamabad), University of Peshawar, Fatimah Jinnah Women University, University of Engineering and Technology (Peshawar), University of Haripur, University of Agriculture (Faisalabad), Commission on Science and Technology for Sustainable Development in the South (COMSATS) Institute of Information and Technology (Islamabad), Islamia University of Bahawalpur, Lahore University of Management Sciences and Foundation of Advancement of Science and Technology National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences (FAST NUCES) University offer examples of institutions which have established career guidance services and/or placement centres. Career guidance services within such universities typically seek to help students to identify their career interests, find a career path and support their effective job search. Placement centres are usually more tightly focused on linking students with industry (Bilal & Malik, 2014), however the distinction between these two types of career guidance services is not always clear. There is limited evidence on the effectiveness of such services, but a recent case study of provision in the FAST National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences (Islamabad Campus) found that such services can have a positive impact on the employability of graduates (Shifa, 2016).

So far the reforms of higher education, including the steps forward that have been made in career guidance provision, have not resolved the skills issues within the graduate labour market. While this is unsurprising given the relatively recent development and inconsistent coverage of career guidance there is a need to attend closely to the efficacy of career guidance services as they develop. However, at present there is a limited evidence base which can inform the development of career guidance in Pakistani higher education. Notable exceptions include Asif, Bukhari, and Ahmad (2015) who found that the career choice of undergraduate medical students is mainly influenced by family. Similarly, Zubair (2012) found that fathers had a major influence on career choice. This research and other similar studies (e.g. Ahmed, Sharif, & Ahmad, 2017; Malik & Kiran, 2012) highlight the lack of access to professional career guidance

and labour market information as important limiting factors in graduates' career development. However, they rarely offer many insights that can support practice.

Despite the limited evidence base there is an interest amongst universities in developing the services that they have. An example is the recent training from the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) for Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUIITEMS) which supported the institution to develop their career guidance provision (Japan International Cooperation Agency, 2016). Another was the decision by HEC in 2017 to organise the first ever national program addressing the delivery of higher education career guidance services. However, there remains a long way to go for access to career guidance to be available to all students across the country.

New insights on career guidance in Pakistani higher education

To deepen our understanding of career guidance in Pakistani higher education we conducted a review of the websites of 74 Pakistani universities (excluding the single discipline, vocationally-focused universities where career guidance has not yet developed). Detailed notes were taken on each university and then coded to analyse the nature of provision offered by that university.

Our website review shows that career guidance centres/services have now been established in 55% of the universities. Career guidance services were most typically located in the larger, more prestigious and longer established universities. Where career guidance services do exist, they are typically focused on providing services addressing career choice and the development of the skills required for managing the initial transition to the labour market (e.g. CV writing and interview skills).

To provide further insights into career guidance in higher education in Pakistan we used the website review to identify institutions which we could approach for interviews. An opportunity sample of 17 institutions where clear contact details were given was identified. These institutions were all contacted and we received five responses from institutions who were willing to be interviewed about their career guidance provision. The interviews were conducted online by a Pakistani national with experience of career guidance in the country. Four of these interviews were in renowned universities located in the metropolitan regions of Pakistan and one was with a practitioner working in a smaller urban university. Participants' level of authority and experience varied, with two working at a senior level, two at officer level and one at an entry level.

Our interviews suggest that it is unusual for careers service staff to have training or qualifications in career guidance. Staff had moved into roles in the university careers service from a range of educational and professional backgrounds including business studies, customer services, human resource management and clinical psychology. Two participants also highlighted the value of international work experience as preparation for this role and argued that

this had given them a greater sensitivity of the importance of need analysis, research and drawing on international best practices. Three of them have developed expertise by participating in relevant trainings and workshops.

Participants reported that they were busy, with services typically having small teams and being expected to work across the whole institution with all students currently enrolled. Most services were small and typically consisted of 1-3 practitioners. Participants reported a wide range of task variety in their roles within careers services. They described conducting one-to-one career guidance sessions, liaising with employers, finding placements and jobs for students, running workshops, conducting mock interviews, providing assessment services, developing curricula in partnership with academic staff and developing resources. The practitioners also reported a number of challenges in delivering this work including difficulties of engaging employers and student disinterest in career development. One senior career guidance practitioner that we spoke to reflected on the challenge of working across large institutions with very limited staff resources within the careers centre. This can result in the service mainly serving a small minority of students who are proactive in developing their careers. However, their service was aware of this problem and was seeking innovative and creative ways to engage the wide student body in their career development.

Other practitioners reflected on whether career guidance should be organised in a generic way or targeted towards specific groups. Career guidance in Pakistani HE is often organised at the university level which can be useful for the development of generic career management skills such as resume writing and interview skills. However, practitioners thought that it could also be useful to develop services for specific groups. One practitioner commented that it would be helpful if career guidance could be integrated into the curriculum, “for example, a university producing only business graduates would require students to research on contemporary business practices and market analysis after which their specific career arena can be identified”.

Our interviews revealed that practitioners broadly reflected the policy rationales when describing their service’s professional objectives. They sought to create links between education and the labour market, to prepare students for work and to support them to transition into a graduate job. They discussed the importance of career guidance services as part of a wider strategy to reduce unemployment and to increase students’ interest in, motivation for, and performance once they enter the world of work. One practitioner commented that as well as meeting social and policy aims, enhanced career management skills would also help students to improve the situation for their family and community. They described focusing on providing information about education and training opportunities and developing employability skills and wider ‘soft skills’. Although this aligned well with national policies focused around skills alignment, the professionals were motivated by helping individual students rather than helping to meet national policy goals.

Although career guidance has grown in Pakistani higher education, provision remains patchy and inconsistent. Universities such as those who contributed to our research are now offering career guidance services, but there is no national strategy, framework or minimum standards for such provision. Practitioners in our interviews felt that this was a limiting factor and argued that there was a need to further develop provision and provide a national strategy to support it.

Building culturally-relevant career guidance in Pakistani higher education

Up until now much of the career guidance practice that has been established in Pakistani higher education has imported models from outside of the country, notably from the UK, US, Europe and Japan. There are clear advantages in drawing on established models of policy and practice when seeking to establish a new field in Pakistan. The existing base of knowledge in career guidance offers Pakistan an array of tools for building a new career guidance system. However, the reliance on theory and practice developed in the West and the English-speaking world can also be a limiting factor for the growth and relevance of career guidance in the East and the Global South. As has already been discussed there is a need to attend to the cultural context of Pakistan more closely.

Career guidance has traditionally been strongest in democratic societies with market economies which place high value on individual autonomy and choice-making. Both Badawi (2008) and the OECD (2004) have explicitly connected democracy and career guidance. Because career guidance encourages autonomy and self-determination and encourages individuals to think about their place in society it has a necessary relationship with politics, including the extent to which democracy exists. The promotion of career guidance services, particularly where they are offered in universal ways, is embedded in wider discourses about the availability of educational, employment, social and human rights. Positioning career guidance in this way therefore raises problems when, as Tehseen-ul-hassan (2017) has argued, Pakistan can be seen as a failing democracy where ideas of choice-making and self-determination are contested and human rights frequently violated (Amnesty International, 2017). This wider political context provides an obstacle for the development of career guidance within the country in ways that can be difficult to fully articulate. Discussion of career guidance in Pakistan therefore needs to recognise that it is being developed in a context that is very different from other places where career guidance has thrived. There is a need to retheorise the activity and to consider how it can interact with the Pakistani context.

There are some also useful theoretical resources offered by theories which have originated in the West. For example, Law's (2009) Community Interaction Theory helps to move career theory away from individualism. Other theories explore the integration of non-Western collectivist perspectives with career guidance (Chadda & Deb, 2013; Flores & Heppner, 2002; Leong, Hardin & Gupta, 2010; Lowe, 2005) and highlight the importance of taking account of cultural identity, conceptions and dynamics as part of the delivery of career guidance. However,

we believe that there is also a strong case for looking beyond such Western-based theories to identify theories that have been developed in contexts that are more similar to Pakistan.

There is a wide range of evidence and theoretical resources that have been developed outside of the West that could be used to inform the development of practice in Pakistan. In India, Arulmani (2011) has blended Western models of career guidance with local knowledge and cultural norms to create new career guidance models. Arulmani's (2014) concept of 'livelihood planning' is particularly helpful as it allows practitioners to broaden discussion on what a career is and what a successful career might look like. This is particularly important if career guidance is going to move outside of the elites in Pakistan and be applied more universally across the population. Sun and Yuen (2012) have elaborated models of career guidance which have been implemented in higher education institutions in China which seek to recognise and utilise the influence of family, senior students and classmates within the career guidance process. Similarly, Neary (2013) reported that in Sri Lanka career guidance needed to be reworked to into more holistic models which encompassed the physical, social, religious and spiritual, cultural and practical environment. Sultana (2017) has provided insights into how collectivist context matters for the Mediterranean region. He has noted how people are expected to act as a member of a family, group or organisation and to take into account the wishes and advice of this group when making career decisions. This has been echoed by empirical studies of career decision-making in Pakistan (Abbasi & Sarwat, 2014; Saleem, Hanan, Saleem, & Shamshad, 2014).

Studies which examine the development and delivery of career guidance within Islamic countries are particularly useful as they provide models for how Islamic epistemologies can be integrated into career guidance practice. Sultana's (2017) recent book on career guidance in the Mediterranean is a useful resource which includes chapters on career guidance in both Maghreb (North Africa) and the Mashrek (Middle East) countries and troubles the idea that career guidance can be simply imported from the global North, arguing for the need for southern and Islamic epistemologies in re-theorising the activity for new contexts. Such experiences have been theorised by Ali, Liu, and Humedian (2004) who have looked at how Islamic perspectives have been incorporated in counselling and therapy and Badawi (2017) who has explored this with particular reference to career guidance. Badawi highlights the importance of recognising the lived reality of faith and spirituality in people's lives and decision-making, the need to involve the wider family and the recognition that work and career are an expression of the divine.

Although it is important for career guidance to be culturally relevant within Pakistan, this should not be taken to mean that it should uncritically reproduce dominant social values. There is an important tradition of career guidance offering emancipatory perspectives for individuals and seeking to open up possibilities for social change as well as social reproduction (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018). For example, many Pakistani higher education students spend some time overseas and have the opportunity for critical reflection on their own career and on the way in which careers and the labour market operates within Pakistan. Such criticality may also

encourage reflection within the profession and its clients about who within Pakistan has the opportunity to have access to career guidance and who does not have access to this.

Due to changing economic, political and cultural dynamics, career guidance has an opportunity to grow in Pakistan. A small shift has already been observed and the field is beginning to grow within higher education. The questions that remain is what kind of career guidance Pakistan will develop and how far the country will seek to move access to it beyond the small enclaves within higher education and the private school system where it currently exists.

Conclusion

Pakistan is establishing a career guidance system. At the moment, it is small, focused on the elites and poorly theorised, but there are a range of policy drivers that suggest that it will continue to grow and develop. We believe that despite the challenges of politics, culture, professionalism and access that have been outlined in this article there is value in the continued development of the Pakistani career guidance system.

If it is to be successful, career guidance in Pakistan will need to draw on established international practice, to develop a locally relevant body of theory and research, and find ways to drive forward the quality of practice in the country. In doing this it will have to negotiate a range of challenges at political, institutional and cultural levels. Such challenges will not be easily overcome as there are substantial obstacles which require both new investment and the developments of indigenous theory in a field where very limited professional and academic resources exist. Within the context of higher education this may mean the development of a national strategy and quality enhancement approach. More generally there is a need to further develop training, continuous professional development and professionalisation and to grow practitioner engagement with a wider range of theory and practice as this develops.

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